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ABSTRACT

This Digest reviews the literature on the subject of teaching English and language arts to gifted and talented students. It discusses how to identify gifted students, outlines some key principles for developing effective programs in English and language arts for the gifted, and suggests possible methods of evaluating gifted students and programs. The Digest also examines some specific resources available to teachers of gifted/talented students. (NKA)

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Teaching English to Gifted Students

by The Staff of the ERIC/REC Clearinghouse

This Digest reviews the literature on the subject of teaching English to gifted students, examining how to identify students who are gifted in the areas of English and language arts, outlining some principles for developing effective programs in English and language arts for the gifted, and suggesting possible methods of evaluating gifted students and programs.

How Should Gifted Students Be Identified?

Definitions of gifted/talented students are numerous. Many are similar to that in the 1978 House of Representatives resolution on education, which defines gifted students as "children, and, wheere applicable, youth, who are identified at the preschool, elementary, or secondary level as possessing demonstrated or potential abilities that give evidence of high performance capability in areas such as intellectual, creative, specific academic or leadership ability, or in the performing and visual arts..." (Nazarro, 1978).

The use of only grade point averages and IQ scores to classify students as gifted/talented has led to growing concern about procedures for identifying gifted students. Howard Gardner, noted Harvard neuropsychologist, has suggested that although the IQ test measures the linguistic and logical/mathematical intelligences, it does not account for at least five more: (1) the kinesthetic, (2) the musical, (3) the spatial, (4) the interpersonal, and (5) the intrapersonal (Scherer, 1985). Clearly, methods other than IQ tests and grade point averages must be used for identifying gifted/talented students for English and language arts programs (Collins and Aiex, 1995). Warnock and Holt (1985) and Delisle and Berger (1990) further note that gifted/talented students include not only students who do well in school but others who may not do well and who may not display easily observable talent.

William W. West expresses a similar point of view. In *Teaching the Gifted and Talented in the English Classroom* (1980), West not only identifies obvious characteristics of the verbally gifted, such as reading avidly, writing frequently and fluently, and participating in oral communication activities, but also stresses the importance of observing students who exhibit signs of disruptive behavior, pointing out that these students may simply be bored or unchallenged.

Criteria for determining gifted/talented students for exemplary programs vary, as may be seen in two programs cited in 1985 by the National Council of Teachers of English as Centers of Excellence. Students identified as gifted/talented for the Eleventh Grade Honors Program at Temple High School (Temple, Texas) are selected chiefly by means of grade point average, writing skills, and teacher recommendations, although IQ scores are also considered (Post, 1986). At Princeton High School (Princeton, Illinois), admission to the five-course Independent Study Curriculum is based on a number of criteria. These include not only grade point average and an intelligence test, but also a critical thinking evaluation (Watson-Glasser Thinking Appraisal), achievement test scores (SRA and Gates-MacGinitie), and two teacher evaluations (Scher, 1986). Clearly, some successful programs for the gifted in English and language arts do not restrict admission criteria to IQ scores and grade point averages.

What Are Some Key Principles in Developing an Effective English and Language Arts Program for the Gifted/Talented?

Frederick B. Tuttle, Jr. (1979), writing about English programs for gifted students, identifies four principles for developing an effective program.

1. Design a curriculum that builds upon the characteristics of the intellectually gifted. While all students need to develop "basic skills," gifted students can often acquire these as they develop their other, more advanced abilities.
2. Provide for continuity. Teachers and administrators at all grade levels should arrive at a consensus regarding the different components of the program and the procedures for carrying it through the grades.
3. Select teachers on the basis of their ability to work with the intellectually gifted and the talented. These teachers should be vitally interested in the gifted, highly intelligent, and emotionally secure, and possess advanced knowledge of their subject matter.
4. Evaluate success within the program on the quality of the work produced rather than by tests of mastery of lower level skills. This will often necessitate the design of new evaluation instruments and procedures, since most of the tests currently being used measure acquisition of knowledge rather than ability to apply knowledge in creative ways.

These principles may be applied to the development of English and language arts programs for gifted students. As Scher (1986) points out, "A gifted program not only gives students a sound foundation in verbal, reading, and critical thinking skills but allows them to use these skills in an interdisciplinary fashion." Or, as another

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teacher puts it in a slightly different way: "The time is ripe for teachers to work relentlessly to create classroom situations in which students are tempted, cajoled, seduced, provoked and firmly rewarded not for being excellent, but for thinking" (Peterson et al., 1992).

What Specific Resources Exist for Teaching English and Language Arts to Gifted/Talented Students?

A number of publications may assist the English and language arts teacher in identifying gifted/talented students and developing an appropriate program for them. For example, the aforementioned text by West not only explores the identification of gifted students' verbal fluency, originality, flexibility, and ability to elaborate, synthesize, and reach closure. A design for a lesson sequence and an example of a teaching sequence are included, as well as suggestions for selecting unit themes.

Jane D. Reed's *Teaching Gifted Students Literature and Language in Grades Nine through Twelve* (1978) discusses topics related to English programs for gifted high school students: philosophical principles, the study of literature, specific examples of subject matter content in literature, the relationships among various phases of language, descriptions of kinds of gifted English students, procedures for conducting literature and language programs for the gifted, and the evaluation of English programs for the gifted student.

Looking for a practical way to help gifted English students in a lower socioeconomic high school setting, Alice Shipman-Campbell (1994) developed a practicum to increase the number and success rate of junior Honors English students taking the English Advanced Placement (AP) examinations. The majority of the students were Latino and African American and somewhat fearful about tests. Shipman-Campbell designed test-taking strategies to allay students' fears and held academic pep rallies to motivate the students. Meanwhile, she taught them style analysis of language and literature. Other key elements that contributed to student success were daily collaborative learning groups and motivational guest speakers in the classroom. Outcomes were positive--not only did the number of juniors taking the test increase, but students also demonstrated more confidence in themselves as English students and as test takers. An added benefit was the students' newfound pleasure in reading, analyzing, and writing about literature.

How Should Gifted Students and English and Language Arts Programs for the Gifted Be Evaluated?

Gifted students, like any other students, must be evaluated. Although it is possible to use traditional methods of evaluation, more innovative methods are also appropriate. Not all practitioners agree, however, on the best methods of evaluation. Scher says that students in the Princeton (Illinois) High School program are not given objective tests, since they have already demonstrated their ability to do well on such tests. Instead, evaluations are based on the writing process, with precision and accuracy as primary evaluation criteria. Students enrolled in a research and analysis course must apply their knowledge of logic, reasoning, and research methods to an investigation of their choice and produce a project in a form compatible with the topic.

Reed (1978) notes a method of evaluation in which the teacher evaluates not only individual students but also the program itself by carefully observing the class during the course or during a unit to determine whether or not students are progressing satisfactorily. One technique involves having each student maintain a manila folder containing descriptions of projects in progress or completed, lists of things read, and written papers that have been graded. These folders will allow the teacher to do a simple check of the accomplishments of each student.

Program evaluation is often conducted through external tests, from standardized achievement tests, to SAT verbal test scores, to advanced placement tests. Reed cautions, however, that such tests are imperfect tools in the evaluation process and so should not be heavily considered.

Evaluation can also be conducted by having students evaluate a course while they are participating in it. Although student surveys may exhibit some bias, they are worthwhile because gifted students tend to be able to cite strengths and weaknesses of programs in which they participate. Finally, program evaluation may be conducted after students leave school by sending evaluation forms to former students or by interviewing them.

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